

Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf, 2014

<https://www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership/>

WHAT IS SERVANT LEADERSHIP?

Servant leadership is a philosophy and set of practices that enriches the lives of individuals, builds better organizations and ultimately creates a more just and caring world.

While servant leadership is a timeless concept, the phrase “servant leadership” was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in *The Servant as Leader*, an essay that he first published in 1970. In that essay, Greenleaf said:

“The servant-leader *is* servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions... The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.

“The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?”

A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the “top of the pyramid,” servant leadership is different. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible.

Robert Greenleaf recognized that organizations as well as individuals could be servant-leaders. Indeed, he had great faith that servant-leader organizations could change the world. In his second major essay, *The Institution as Servant*, Greenleaf articulated what is often called the “credo.” There he said: “This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person to person, now most of it is mediated through institutions – often large, complex, powerful, impersonal; not always competent; sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them.”

The servant leadership philosophy and practices have been expressed in many ways and applied in many contexts. Some of the most well-known advocates of servant leadership include Ken Blanchard, Stephen Covey, Peter Senge, M. Scott Peck, Margaret Wheatley, Ann McGee-Cooper & Duane Trammell, Larry Spears, and Kent Keith.

Ten Principles of Servant Leadership

By Robert Greenleaf

1. **Listening** - Traditionally, leaders have been valued for their communication and decision making skills. Servant-leaders must reinforce these important skills by making a deep commitment to listening intently to others. Servant-leaders seek to identify and clarify the will of a group. They seek to listen receptively to what is being said (and not said). Listening also encompasses getting in touch with one's inner voice, and seeking to understand what one's body, spirit, and mind are communicating.
2. **Empathy** - Servant-leaders strive to understand and empathize with others. People need to be accepted and recognized for their special and unique spirit. One must assume the good intentions of coworkers and not reject them as people, even when forced to reject their behavior or performance.
3. **Healing** - Learning to heal is a powerful force for transformation and integration. One of the great strengths of servant-leadership is the potential for healing one's self and others. In "The Servant as Leader", Greenleaf writes, "There is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the compact between the servant-leader and led is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something that they have."
4. **Awareness** - General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader. Making a commitment to foster awareness can be scary--one never knows that one may discover! As Greenleaf observed, "Awareness is not a giver of solace - it's just the opposite. It disturbs. They are not seekers of solace. They have their own inner security."
5. **Persuasion** - Servant-leaders rely on persuasion, rather than positional authority in making decisions. Servant-leaders seek to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. This particular element offers one of the clearest distinctions between the traditional authoritarian model and that of servant-leadership. The servant-leader is effective at building consensus within groups.
6. **Conceptualization** - Servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to "dream great dreams." The ability to look at a problem (or an organization) from a conceptualizing perspective means that one must think beyond day-to-day realities. Servant-leaders must seek a delicate balance between conceptualization and day-to-day focus.
7. **Foresight** - Foresight is a characteristic that enables servant-leaders to understand lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision in the future. It is deeply rooted in the intuitive mind.
8. **Stewardship** - Robert Greenleaf's view of all institutions was one in which CEO's, staff, directors, and trustees all play significant roles in holding their institutions in trust for the great good of society.
9. **Commitment to the Growth of People** - Servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, servant-leaders are deeply committed to a personal, professional, and spiritual growth of each and every individual within the organization.
10. **Building Community** - Servant-leaders are aware that the shift from local communities to large institutions as the primary shaper of human lives has changed our perceptions and has caused a feeling of loss. Servant-leaders seek to identify a means for building community among those who work within a given institution.